

Scene Food

EATING THE WAY ITALIANS DO > 2F

BEEF — HEARTY WINTER FARE > 5F

FOLD UP SOME FABULOUS FOIL > 8F

THE DENVER POST

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★ Section F

DINING | Potager

Its bread and butter: bold menu, fun setting

By Tucker Shaw
Denver Post Dining Critic

You can tell almost everything you need to know about a restaurant by its bookends: the bread and butter it serves at the beginning of a meal, and the coffee it serves at the end.

At Potager, a classy Capitol Hill bistro devoted to seasonal cooking and innovative dishes, the bread and butter are very, very good.

So is the coffee.

Sometimes I'm wrong with my bread-and-butter theory, of course. But at Potager, it plays out. This place, like its bookends, is very, very good.

Great even. Exhibit A: The room itself. With floor-to-ceiling windows that look directly onto East 14th Avenue and a cunning one-room arrangement of bar, dining area and kitchen, Potager is spacious and intimate at the same time. Concrete floors and unfinished walls seal a sophisticated, urban vibe that's also lighthearted and cozy.

Exhibit B: The clientele. There's no one in the house who isn't having a good time. Servers are busy and cheerful. The kitchen churns with energy, not chaos. It's lively at Potager even on uncrowded Tuesdays, manageable even on full-house Fridays.

Exhibit C: The menu. Potager's bold (and sometimes risky) menu changes every couple of months. Take your time to read this moving target carefully.

There's stuff that you would expect to see on a contemporary bistro menu: duck liver mousse, baked cod brandade, roast chicken with prosciutto.

And then there are the double takes: Pizza with rosemary ... and pear? Shrimp risotto with paprika ... and orange zest? Lobster ... with ginger and carrot? Lemon and thyme soufflé ... with peekytoe crab sauce? Fans of Jean-Georges Vongerichten, a strategically successful chef with restaurants in New York and Las Vegas, will recognize some of these zany flavor combinations.

Granted, ideas like these don't always

> See DINING on 4F

Something's missing from NYC's Aspen

By Tucker Shaw
Denver Post Staff Writer

New York—You can try, but you can't get much farther from the slopes of Aspen than Aspen, a trendy new restaurant and lounge in New York City's Flatiron District.

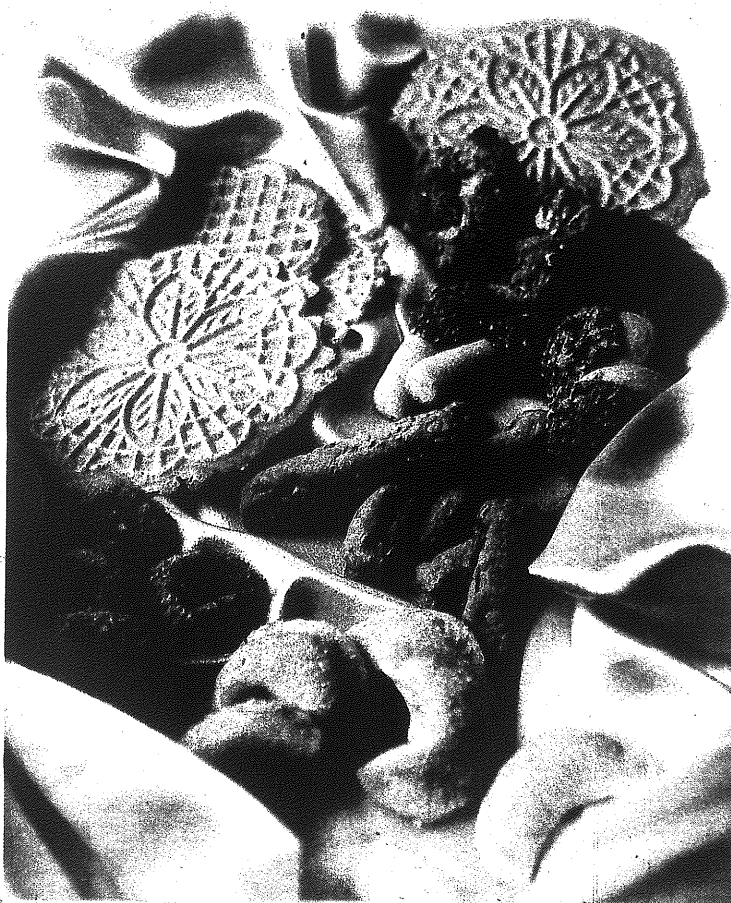
Sure, they have some things in common. For one thing, the place takes its name from Colorado's most famous celebrity-ridden resort. For another, it's definitely reaching for the same glitter set.

Well, sort of. Aspen probably would rather see Kate Hudson at the bar than Goldie Hawn.

Actually, scratch that. Who they really want to see here is Lindsay Lohan. Aspen, the restaurant, hasn't yet officially thrown open the doors, but it's deep into its "soft" opening. Which means you can get past the bouncer for a drink and a bite if you're insistent enough.

> See ASPEN on 6F

OUR FAVORITE



Every office has them. And every office is particularly nice to them this time of year: Those folks who have a way with a holiday cookie and a love of sharing their goodies with colleagues.

We have our own cheery bunch here at The Denver Post.

T.J. in Sports, whose white-and-dark chocolate treats practically set off a riot among co-workers.

Barb in Editorial, whose chocolate-dipped shortbread wins her brownie points year-round. Cynthia in Features, who keeps her grandmother's pizzelle recipe alive and, in turn, her deskmates lively. Dana, who assembles Colorado Sunday each week and date-oatmeal cookies each December.

These folks are genuine cookie heroes, and we salute them. And we steal from them, as well. Taking

their recipes home and passing them off as our own. (If nobody asks, it's not our obligation to disclose, right?)

So this year, we asked them to get baking a little early so we could roll out their best dough for readers, as well as their fellow journalists.

We humbly offer these recipes as a Christmas gift to you.

— Denver Post Staff

Santa's Belly Buttons | Filled Holiday Crescents | Nearly Nonna's Pizelles | Almond Macaroons

Recipes > 3F

Photo by RJ SANGOSTI | The Denver Post

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DINING: Eclectic dishes reward your daring

◀ CONTINUED FROM 1F

work. But when they do pull it off at Potager, it's on.

It was one of these leap-of-faith dishes that sealed my feelings for Potager: linguine with tomatoes, pears, nuts, capers and currants. At first glance, I thought, no way. Too crazy and, well, no bacon.

But I took a leap of faith anyway. Lucky me. This was a truly spectacular bowl of pasta. A perfect snake pit of just-toothy strands of linguine tossed with barely caramelized cubes of pear, tart but sweet marinated tomatoes, and a nutty trifecta of cashews, pine nuts and walnuts. Scattered over the top, a handful each of capers and currants, little Trojan horses carrying opposing blasts of brine and fructose. Oils from the tomatoes, nuts and capers melted together, glistening. And in the middle of it all, a capitol dome of creamy, slow-melting mascarpone just waiting to be stirred into the noodles. Or dolloped onto each bite, one at a time. With so many moving parts, this dish could have been a disaster. But it was delicious, and I was floored. Eating it was interactive, like a game: With so many distinct components, you can build millions of combos on your fork. It was unusual, busy and ebullient; a real stroke of genius. When the menu changes, I'll miss it.

Other high points on the current (winter) menu: homemade gnocchi with chanterelles and shallots. Roasted figs with ricotta and argula. Curried butternut soup with pear marmalade. Sautéed oph with celery root.

Low points on the menu are few, but they're here. A fast-changing menu means some unperfected dishes. Lamb shoulder roasted with garlic and white beans was well-prepared but ordinary. Smoked trout salad was burdened, not enhanced, by potatoes. And trying to make any sense at all of the lemon and thyme soufflé with pecktoe crab sauce was an exercise in tail-chasing.

But who else is daring enough to put a lemon and thyme soufflé with pecktoe crab sauce on the menu? Takes guts, and guts are rarer than ever in kitchens these days.

It is worth noting that Potager will make vegetarians happy. Depending on the latest menu, you might find a delicate beet risotto or a hearty wild mushroom lasagna. Pumpkin, sage and pine nut ravioli. Sautéed mozzarella cheese with olive-caper sauce. And, of course, the gnocchi and linguine.

It is also worth noting that Potager is devoted to seasonal cooking. This is great, but watch what you order, or things can get redundant.



Photos by RJ Sangosti | The Denver Post

While Potager's menu changes often, its intimate yet lively one-room arrangement of dining room, bar and kitchen is a fixture.



The unusual combination of linguine, tomatoes, pears, nuts, capers and currants topped with mascarpone is pasta perfection.

At one visit, I found pears in my appetizer, main course and dessert. I love pears and all, but next time I'll order the chocolate pudding for dessert.

Have I mentioned the chocolate pudding? There aren't enough column inches in this paper to do justice to Potager's best dessert. But if you do nothing else, sit at the bar for a cup of coffee or a glass of Sauternes and a ramekin of Potager's creamy, sweet, bitter, smooth, coma-inducing chocolate pudding. Simple, classic, perfect. (And don't worry, it's always on the menu.)

One wobbly but manageable feature of Potager is its wine-pairing recommendations. Listen to your instincts and don't be afraid to order outside the wine lines. Sure, the Georg Mahn Dornfelder (Germany), suggested as a pair with the lamb sausage with sun-dried cherries, was perfect. But the Snowden Lost Vineyard cabernet (Napa), pegged to wash down the lamb shoulder, didn't work. Thankfully there was a Langmeil syrah (Australia) on the menu, and that did the job nicely.

Know this: It's not cheap to eat at Potager. But the prices aren't out of line with the rest of the best restaurants in Denver, and given the level of talent on display, you won't feel ripped off.

Some seating advice: Potager doesn't accept reservations, so come early or late. And if you can, be picky about your seat. At the wrong table, the roaring ventilation system overhead can suffocate your conversation. Jockey for a table by the windows.

Potager chef-owner Teri Rippeto is clearly a curious person who likes to study, experiment and learn. She also likes to show off. A nutty professor of sorts, with high

artistic ambitions. Lofty standards, deep talent, remarkable attention to detail, bravo.

And really, really good bread and butter.

Dining critic Tucker Shaw can be reached at 303-850-1958 or dining@denverpost.com.

Potager

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